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Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration, Jack Mahoney, Georgetown University Press, 2011 (ISBN 978-1-58901-769-6), xiv + 188 pp., Pb \$26.95 / £18.75

Modern doctrinal theology, Jack Mahoney contends, has failed to take evolution seriously. While theologians have mostly repeated traditional teaching, the new paradigm of evolution has cut the metaphysical foundations from under that teaching. As a result, the explanatory power and persuasiveness of dogmas have diminished and ever fewer people really believe them.

I shall first sketch the doctrinal topics that, in Mahoney's view, need reframing, then offer some reflections on his project's overall justification and implications. I shall do this as someone who agrees that most theologians have hitherto afforded evolution far too little attention and need to do far more to incorporate it into their thinking.

One of the first doctrines called into question is original sin, which, Mahoney suggests, sits uncomfortably with evolutionary theory because of its pessimism about human nature. In its place, theologians need to uncover a view of paradise as not lost but 'ungained', and of humans as not only mirroring the divine image but as possessing its likeness (pp. 66–7, 18–22). Even Charles Darwin, Mahoney correctly reminds us, recognised in humans an aboriginal moral sense derived from social instinct (pp. 25–7). The social corollary of this relatively positive anthropology is altruism. Mahoney sees human social life as more altruistic than egoistic. This has the theological effect of sidelining sacrifice: if humans are, in fact, not utterly concupiscent and depraved, what purpose do Christ's propitiatory sacrifice and the ongoing human sacrifices that remember it serve? The result is an economy of general if uncultured exchange. As Mahoney puts it: 'God created humankind in the image of his own altruism.' (p. 44)

This anthropology has deeper implications for doctrine. The primary locus of soteriology is, for Mahoney, not the Crucifixion but the Incarnation, by which Christ communicates divine altruism to the human species (pp. 71–8). The Incarnation is, therefore, not principally part of a divine compensation for human faults but an excess of gift, which encompasses not only Christians but unbelievers too (pp. 119–21). Moreover, the Eucharist should be viewed not as commemorating or repeating a sacrifice for sin, but as effecting the altruistic unification of all Christ's disciples with each other and with God, who is the 'origin of all altruism in the new covenant that he is instituting' (p. 139).

How may this project be appraised? Mahoney's resistance to the common tendency to infer from the theory of natural selection a negative anthropology is entirely justified: by itself, natural selection tells us nothing about sin, positing a mere mechanism that is, as such, value-neutral. From this perspective, death is indeed rightly viewed not as a penalty for sin, whether personal or collective, but as a 'biological necessity and a requirement' (p. 63). But Mahoney's privileging of altruism above sacrifice seems to be a not entirely convincing response. As Harvard University's Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, directed by Martin Nowak, is currently showing, evolutionary co-operation is not merely altruistic but, in multiple dimensions, sacrificial, both within species and across species. Co-operation, in other words, is sometimes costly. Sacrifice is not, therefore, an outmoded theological dogma to be jettisoned in favour of less demanding imagery, but points to a deep reality of human and biological life: that, as a result of death, new life may arise. Mahoney illuminatingly traces the origins of the concept of altruism to Auguste Comte but moves on without comment (p. 32). Yet this genesis suggests that the ideal of altruism is founded on the shallow materialist sands of nineteenth century positivism and cannot by itself capture the full spiritual drama of the development of sentient and conscious life.

These are legitimate points for debate about Mahoney's project. In some other instances, however, evolutionary theory seems to be deployed to provide a series of

convenient pegs on which to hang revised doctrines. On p. 150, for example, it is seen as legitimating a 'greater sensitivity to concrete particularities in sexual ethics'. Although heightened sensitivity to particularity is laudable, in this area of ethics as in others, it seems far from clear that evolutionary ideas promote the implied liberalisation of official teaching. Notwithstanding the burgeoning volume of accounts of 'gay' animals, it would seem that evolutionary theory provides a context for human life within which biological reproduction *is*, in fact, privileged over other possible purposes for the human species. Those alternative purposes may, at best, derive their legitimacy from their indirect contribution to reproduction, such as by freeing some adults from its biological demands in order that they may perform general care functions within the group.

Another contestable speculation is that, if the theologian takes evolution seriously, the 'distinction between nature and grace ceases to exist' (p. 145). In fact, it would be difficult to argue that any particular theory of the nature–grace relation is intrinsically more or less incompatible with evolutionary theory. Rather, the two discourses need to be aligned in such ways that the connections drawn are convincing. One could just as well construct a view of evolution based on a clear nature–grace distinction—as did the Victorian Catholic evolutionary biologist St George Mivart, in refusing an emergentist conception of the soul—as ally evolutionary theology with an advocacy of nature–grace continuity—as did Henri de Lubac in embracing the thought of his fellow Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Despite raising some large questions, the kind of project that Mahoney pursues is desperately needed in theology. Let us hope that the discussion his book is likely to produce generates further detailed reflection on these pressing questions.

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